

State of Mind – April 2008

It's just a fact: no one comes to a clinical psychologist to talk about good news (unless they are manic or delusional and happily so!). Psychotherapy with individuals and families has been about finding ways out of clouds of despair or the twisting agony of anxiety. The goal has always been to help others develop new perceptions, thoughts and behaviors that would better assure a happy and productive life.

The answers of yesterday sometimes seem like platitudes in this fast paced and rapidly changing society. Today, there are so many things beyond our control that have a direct bearing on how well we can take on life's challenges with a reasonable assurance of success. Such pressures, which ultimately have an impact on business owners and employees, must be addressed in a practical manner. Thus, the complex problems of today's world have made the discernment of clear solutions more difficult, or at least seemingly so.

Many of us Baby Boomers are filled with a yearning for "the old days," a period of time when there was at least an illusion of control. That longing is met in equal measure with our generational quest for achieving the American dream ... through honesty, hard work, sacrifice, risk and tenacity. We all know the sequence: go to school; get a college degree; work hard and be well rewarded. Such is not always the case with the job market fluctuating and the economy taking us on thrill rides. In actuality, rewards do not always follow. While we continue to rely upon those familiar, old safety nets, we become increasingly disturbed, as we realize that yesterday's safety nets have become terribly ineffective in catching us in today's more turbulent times. What's a Boomer to do? Here are few ideas.

Seek Inspiration: Currently, a mini-series is airing chronicling the political life of President John Adams. His commitment and sacrifice to the ideals upon which the United States was founded have left me in awe. His story is a reminder about how one man can truly make a difference. This has led me to reflect on those who aroused my passions and molded my desire to do right. As always my foremost motivator (and frequent critic) was my father, who made me pledge to "Live today...not wait and be grateful." Luckily, others also stand out as they demanded excellence and accepted no excuses for mediocrity. In particular, I hold dearly to the challenge of my major professor and mentor, Dr. Steven Goldstein, who died from leukemia in 1977. He was just 39. Until his last day of life, I respectfully referred to him as "Chief." During our last phone call he begged, "Don't give up...do the right thing for the right reasons...don't give up." The words of these everyday heroes echo in my mind on a daily basis. Whenever I begin to let their voices fade, I tend to get lost.

Nurture Friendships: Regardless the idiosyncrasies of our personalities, we, as humans, need some form of contact with others. The literature shows that people in good marriages, who have pets and maintain friendships are the healthiest and happiest. As we get older the chance to form and sustain friendships becomes less likely so whenever they occur they become more precious. Recently, my graduate school roommate wrote to inform me that he and his wife will be in “Wild Wonderful” in July. His words: “The time has come to get reacquainted after 10-15 years of self absorbed life, work and family, accompanied by the avoidance of maintaining meaningful friendships,” brought more than just a smile to my face. After all these years, he remembered, and it mattered. The joy of anticipation of his visit reminded me of the power of being connected and the fact that our busy lives often pervert our priorities. I am making my list of special people and making sure that I reestablish or reinforce the ties that initially brought us together. These are the folks who can lean on you, and upon whom you can rely, when in need. Because they are so special, even when much time passes between contacts, all melts; it just seems like yesterday when you had been together.

Establish a Game Plan: Without laying out your goals and objectives for life you will drift aimlessly and be buffeted by the pressures inherent in the day-to-day struggles. In most of my seminars, I ask participants to create a statement of a Life Philosophy that contains the values and driving forces that define them. This forms the base upon which a Life Mission can be built. No one whom you meet should be surprised when you reveal these aspects of your being. These values and resultant philosophy serve as an internal source of inspiration and the map upon which you can depend when feeling lost. The philosophy usually remains fixed, but the mission is always evolving. As I have aged, my perspectives and priorities have changed—sometimes to my surprise and amazement. The old plans were not right for today. Revising them has rejuvenated my spirit.

Celebrate Life: The phrase is corny; the prescription is obvious, no doubt. But still we forget! Years ago, Abraham Heschel, an Orthodox rabbi, scholar and wise man, lectured to an overflow crowd at my alma mater, Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. The nation was at war in Vietnam and Cambodia. There was chaos. Fear and lack of control were prevalent. In the midst of such turbulence, this humble man stood up before us and beseeched us to celebrate every second we are alive, good and bad. He declared that we can go back to anything but reliving a moment in time...and to let any go by without relishing the experience is not only wasteful, but a form of blasphemy. It was his contention, “Time is the essence of life...the essence of life is God...this is the gift he has given us and to waste it is sin.”

Embedded within this celebration is **appreciation**...for inspiration, friendship and life’s mission. Even in these times of strife and unpredictability, we can thrive. We do not need to be in a therapist’s office. We are stewards of our own lives, as well as of those

around us, and even those in faraway places. We will find comfort and purpose standing up for our ideals and the fundamental beliefs set forth by our founding fathers, who struggled, overcame doubt and adversity, but remained committed to these pursuits: Life, Liberty and Happiness. These may be old concepts, yet they are hard truths. In many respects, they still represent our keys to making it.